

Oh, Deer!

CHRIS FRAZIER
Editor, Knowledge
U.S. Army Combat Readiness Center

Striking a large animal on the roadway is serious business even when you're protected behind the sturdy frame of an automobile. In most cases, the accident is survivable. On a motorcycle, however, the outcome is almost never good, especially if the rider doesn't have the proper training or personal protective equipment. Fortunately for Keith Nolin, when nature called, he was prepared.

It was a misty January morning, and Nolin was traveling down a 40-mph stretch of road that leads to Fort Rucker's Knox Army Airfield, where he works for Army Fleet Support as an avionics, electronics and instruments mechanic. As he crested a hill, he spotted two deer—a buck and a doe—grazing on the side of the road. Since the road is surrounded by woods, the sight wasn't out of the ordinary. But this day would be different.

As Nolin approached, he kept a close eye on the deer. Suddenly, something startled the animals and they bolted across the road. Nolin said there was about a 3-foot gap between the buck and doe, so, rather than lock the brakes on the slick asphalt and risk putting the bike on the ground, he braced himself, leaned forward on the handle bars and aimed for the opening.

Nolin avoided the buck but slammed into the doe's right front quarter. The impact killed the 110-pound deer and sent her spinning around the side of the bike, striking Nolin in the left leg. Amazingly, he didn't lose control of the motorcycle; however, fearing his leg might've been broken in the collision, he continued driving toward the airfield.

"I was only about a mile from the guard shack, so I kept on because I wanted to be around someone when I got off the bike in case my leg was broken," he said. "If there was a problem, then someone would be able to assist me."

Nolin escaped the collision with little more than some bruising and soreness in his leg and foot, but his motorcycle wasn't so lucky. The 1989 Honda Pacific Coast, an 800cc midsize touring bike, suffered heavy damage to the front fairings and fork.

"The deer hit the crash bar before she hit me, and the fairing absorbed the brunt of the impact," Nolin said. "I got the tail end, but the bike protected me as it was designed to do. I'm glad I was on it rather than a smaller one."

So what did Nolin do correctly to come out of his animal encounter unhurt? Well, just about everything. He credits his training—he completed the Motorcycle Safety Foundation RiderCourse™ on post—PPE and 10 years of riding experience, as well as a little luck, for protecting him in the accident.

Nolin said the MSF courses give riders the tools they need to be confident in their skills. He believes every state should require mandatory motorcycle safety courses for all riders before they get on the road.

"(Riding) is fun, but you've got to be serious about it," he said. "If you're not, whenever you're subjected to something, you're not going to be ready and you might lock the rear or front tire and lose control of the motorcycle. If (riders) haven't had a safety course, they need to."

A heavily wooded post, Fort Rucker has more than its fair share of wildlife. When driving through certain areas on the installation, it's common knowledge you might be sharing the roadway with everything from wild boar to turkeys. Unfortunately for Nolin, he's had several previous encounters with the local fauna. Just a few weeks before the deer incident, an owl hit his motorcycle's right mirror. He's also had run-ins with armadillos, possums and too many rabbits to count.

Because the unexpected should always be expected, Nolin wears all his PPE when riding, including a jacket, full-finger gloves, padded boots and a full-face helmet, which he said gives him good visibility and has an anti-fog shield. Although he's required to wear his PPE while riding on post, it's a practice he'd follow even if he didn't work on Fort Rucker. Knowing you've done all you can to protect yourself makes the ride more enjoyable, he said.

"You've got to have good gear," Nolin said. "Had I gone down, I would've had something between me and the road. ... There's no way I'd ride without my gear."

Nolin's supervisor, Chris Holmes, isn't surprised Nolin made it through his run-in with the deer virtually



unscathed. The attention to detail Keith pays when preparing for a ride also shows up in his work.

"If there's a problem, he's going to fix it," said Holmes, an avionics supervisor for AFS. "He isn't going to leave something undone. That's why he's one of the best we've got."

Although his bike might now be totaled, Nolin's deer encounter won't stop him from riding a motorcycle to work. If his PC800 can't be fixed, he plans on buying a replacement for the two-wheeled commute he's made for the past eight years. Next time, though, he said he might stop and let the deer pass instead of trying to drive past them.

"They're just so unpredictable," he said. "You never know what they're going to do."

Deer Crossing

Here are some tips to avoid deer-vehicle collisions from motorcyclecruiser.com:

- Deer travel in groups. One deer means there probably are more, so slow down immediately even if the one you see is off the road and running away.
- Heed deer crossing signs, particularly in the seasons and times of day when deer are active. Slow down, use your high beams and cover the brakes.
- The Wisconsin Department of Transportation says deer collisions peak in October and November, with a smaller peak in May and June. Such crashes between April and August are most likely to occur between 8 p.m. and midnight. Between November and January, 5 to 10 p.m. were the danger times.
- Additional good, powerful driving lights are worth their weight in gold on a deserted road at night. Alternatively, fit a bulb with a 100-watt high beam.
- Noise—a horn, revving your engine, etc.—might drive deer away.
- Flashing your headlights can break the spell that seems to cause deer to freeze.
- Don't challenge large animals by approaching them. A buffalo, moose, elk, mountain lion, bear or large deer might attack to drive you off. Stay back and consider turning and riding farther away.
- Stay away from an injured animal. It might attack or injure you unintentionally if it comes to and tries to escape.
- Don't swerve if a collision appears imminent. Braking hard right up to the point of impact is good, but you want to be stabilized if you do collide, which will give you the greatest chance of remaining upright.
- Spread out if riding in a group. This pattern will keep one rider who hits a deer from taking other riders down with him.
- Wear protective gear. As with other crashes, no one plans to hit an animal. The only way to be ready when it happens is to be ready on every ride.

FYI

According to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, more than 1.5 million deer-vehicle accidents occur annually in the United States, killing about 150 people and causing at least \$1 billion in vehicle damage. In 2003, more than one-third of fatal vehicle-animal accidents involved motorcycle riders.